

169 ✓
*Ridicule the most successful Adversary
of the Truth:*

15
A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF
St. MARY AT TOWER, IPSWICH,

On the Twenty-third of April, 1798,

BY THE

R
Rev. JOHN ROBERTS, A.M.

Rector of Creeting, in the County of Suffolk.

Ipswich:

PRINTED BY GEORGE JERMYN.

SOLD BY MESSRS. RIVINGTONS, LONDON; FLETCHER, OXFORD;
AND NICHOLSON, CAMBRIDGE.



TO THE
Rev. JOHN STRACHEY, D.D.
ARCHDEACON OF SUFFOLK,

AND TO THE
CLERGY THEN PRESENT,

THIS
S E R M O N,

PUBLISHED SOLELY IN DEFERENCE TO THEIR OPINION,

I S A D D R E S S E D,

BY THEIR MOST OBEDIENT,

HUMBLE SERVANT,

JOHN ROBERTS.

Creeping, April 25, 1798.

TO THE

ROY JOHN STACHES, D.D.

RECTOR OF ST. JOHN'S

ST. JOHN'S

ST. JOHN'S

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN'S

ON SUNDAY

THE 11TH OF SEPTEMBER

BY THE REV. JOHN STACHES, D.D.

JOHN STACHES, D.D.

Printed by J. W. B. 1783

A
S E R M O N,

&c.



ST. JUDE, ver. 17 & 18,

*“But, beloved, remember ye the words,
which were spoken before, of the
Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ :
that they told you, there should be
Mockers in the last time, who should
walk after their own ungodly Lusts.”*

IT has been frequently, and very justly
remarked, that the natural and moral
World are, in a strong degree, analo-
gous. If this be true, degeneracy is in-
cidental to both : and a confusion of the

B intellectual

intellectual system, is as much to be apprehended, as a decay of the natural one. *St. Jude* alludes to some remarkable defection from the Faith, which arose probably from an heresy of the Gnostics, or Nicoalites*: and *St. Paul*, enumerating the vices of posterity, particularizes Pride, Self-love, and Blasphemy. Yet, as human nature is constantly the same; and as virtue has ever been a subject of ridicule to the irreligious; the apostles intimate not, that scoffers were unknown previous to the introduction of Christianity, but, that in later ages, they should become more avowedly numerous, and more daringly profane.

* Heretics of the first century, mentioned by *St. John*, and *St. Paul*; the philosophers and *Voltaires* of their day. *Gnostics*, men of learning, opposed to the simplicity of the Christian teachers. *Nicoalites*, so called from *Nicolas* their founder, a Deacon of the Church at *Jerusalem*.

profane. The latter clause of the text, suggests the cause of this decline in morality ; and nothing, in fact, could produce this so effectually, as to abandon God, discard Religion, and be blindly devoted to sensual pleasure, and a reprobate mind. And indeed, men, who are impatient of restraint, flame out into immediate opposition : and being slaves to the most imperious of all masters, their own inordinate passions, scoff at religion, not in contempt, but from an aversion to its principles. Yet whence, it will be asked, this antipathy to a system of morality, so perfect ; to a code of instruction so easy, and delightful ? The objection is its excellence. They cannot brook that spirited integrity, with which it thwarts, disarms and confounds hypocrisy ; that vigorous opposition, and jealous scrutiny, by which it searches the cause, and counteracts

counteracts the effects of sin. Did, the religion of Christ conform to their feelings, or address itself to their passions, their mockery, would be changed into rapture; their incredulity become enthusiasm. But they cannot worship the God of heaven, and bow to the idols of lust and debauchery; they cannot be christians in faith, and infidels in practise. This then, if not avowed, is the cause of their infidelity; and this, their true objection, to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And yet, if so determined their opposition, why not rather have recourse to invective, than ridicule? The reason is obvious. So impregnable is revealed religion, and so superior, to all systems of morality whatever, that no man of sense commences open hostilities against it; and the arguments, which the most ingenious

ingenious unbelievers * have produced, are either spun in so fine a web, that it is difficult to unravel their tendency ; or are so flimsy and weak, that they cease to be dangerous. The only expedient therefore, is Raillery ; and a poor resource, at best. To speak of christianity with contempt, to treat its ministers with derision, may be a criterion of genuine wit ; but is no proof of understanding, or humanity. And I would rather be esteemed a prodigy of dulness, so I were good and inoffensive ; than be the brightest Jacobin, that ever ingeniously scoffed, or triumphantly blasphemed.

Foolish are the motives, and most dangerous the consequences, of this vice. The folly of it chiefly consists, in
estimating

* All the family of doubt, hesitation, and infidelity, under whatever denomination, from *Pyrrho* or *Heraclitus*, to *Bolingbroke*, *Hume*, &c. &c.

estimating wit by the standard of wickedness ; and in affecting to ridicule, what it is madness to disbelieve. I am far from insinuating by this, that all have not a right to examine the holy scriptures ;---they undoubtedly have :---and to believe only from report, what they should admit upon conviction, is either folly, or indolence in the extreme. Candid inquiry will alleviate the objections of the timid ; and candid criticism will assist the head, in removing the prejudices of the heart. A book, which is open to all, appeals to the judgment of all. But Ridicule is an improper test of truth. It is derogatory from the honour of Him, whose majesty should be extolled, not suffer a depression ; and can neither change the nature of God, or explain the mysteries of his religion. And besides, are there not subjects enough to engage
this

this dangerous talent, but something sacred must be made ridiculous, to enhance the pleasure, by an aggravation of the guilt? must the arrows of this intemperate archer fly, like the eagle, against the light of day? Shall the city, the camp, the court escape; and God alone be used, as the whetstone of wicked ingenuity; or be set up in the house of Dagon, to create the sport of such Philistines; that God, whom not to love, is ingratitude, and to affront whom, is destruction?

But the most repeated admonitions will not, in an age like this, retard the progress of impiety. Habit, example, and evil communication, are such powerful and prejudicial advocates, that all, which is advanced in favour of sobriety, will be received with indifference, or treated with contempt. This decay of religion, is followed
hard

hard by a neglect of all that is modest, correct, or honourable: and a general corruption of morals, *must* end in a subversion of Law and Government.; we raise the torch, that will glare upon our *ruin*.---And yet, the most profligate language of the most profligate men should not prevent a minister of the gospel from reprobating such abandoned behaviour; these encroachments of infidelity should proportionably excite the indignation, and animate the eloquence of the preacher. To palliate or to conceal that which the heart condemns, is a proof either of mean duplicity, or of unmanly apprehension.

Upon his admission into society, the young man judges without experience; decides without reflection; and ignorant of what may ensue, is totally insensible of danger. Pride forbids the interference

ference of authority. Fashion invites him to scenes of dissipation. He obeys with impatience : makes one hasty sacrifice of the prejudices of education ; and, rejecting the sure mercies of God, professes himself a votary of Licentiousness. Initiated so auspiciously, he soon receives the polish of refinement : blasphemes, in contempt of what is great or good ; and rails, to display the poignancy of his wit. Infatuated, and ungrateful ! Rebel against God and nature ! But let us bring this home : place this licentious delinquent in the situation of a father ; and think of what ingratitude he would accuse a child, who hated his instructions ; or made his sollicitude a subject of mirth. I anticipate the reply : ---yet pause a moment, and consider. This man also has a parent ; and owes, therefore, filial submission : he has a
c kind,

kind, beneficent, and heavenly Father, who has accepted a ransom for sin; and (if he forfeits not the title) has made him a joint heir, with "Christ, the righteous," of glory and immortality. What return has been made? he has wantonly scattered the arrows of ridicule, and wounded his benefactor and guide. He has "sat in the scorner's chair," if not to affront, yet to depreciate God's holy religion: for nothing is so humiliating as ridicule. Christ came into the world ---yet this insolent scoffer denies his Saviour: or (what is more preposterously wicked) has subscribed to the truths of divine revelation, that his subsequent contempt and blasphemy may stand forth more eminently conspicuous; or savour of defiance, in as offensive and odious degree as possible. Now, if this be not hardness of heart, and "to walk
after

after our own ungodly lusts," language has lost its meaning; or religion is an idle rhapsody of words.

This is a subject of no small importance to the parent. If we indeed, regard our children, as creatures, who have a duty to fulfil; let us teach them, while the tablet is immaculate, to think with awe, and to speak with reverence of the Gospel. Let us assure them, that it is no common subject, to supply a want of conversation, or to bear the pressure of levity and arrogance: nor ever to be polluted by an intercourse with the world; except when Charity appeals to its exertions; or ignorance pleads for its assistance. How dreadful then the wickedness of those, who make a mockery of God, the noviciate of stripling atheists; and expose religion as a butt and mark, to assay the strength of aspir-

ing

ing impiety ! and who play such monstrous conceits on the stage of depravity, as would shock modesty to witness ; venting execrations, which Blasphemers only can invent without fear, and utter without shame ! These are men, who frequent societies, in which obscenity is recommended by the charms of music ; by the glow of wit, and the heat of wine. Little do they think, upon how dangerous a precipice they stand.

Yet the shades of guilt may still be deepened, and admit a colouring more dark and diabolical. For in charity I should hope that this wicked buffoonery of the tongue is, at least, an unpremeditated crime ; and rather arises from excess of inadvertency, than any malicious intention. But what, shall we say of those, who dedicate their hours of study, to amass opinions, subversive of
the

the truth, and circulate in writing such contemptuous aspersions of their Lord and God ; that, but to read them without horror, argues a tincture of irreligion ? Their poisonous principles are infused with such subtlety and address ; with such apparent plausibility and candor, that from an admiration of their wit, we contract an insensible partiality for books, which bear the stamp and character of Hell. Let not these destructive lights, dazzle or perplex the ardent and inexperienced Student. It demands a more hardy resolution, than all possess, to be tempted, and yet stand : it requires a nice discrimination, to separate the blaze of Wit from the glare of Atheism ; when both are collected and concentrated. There are treatises enough, which will instruct the mind, without fallacy ; and amuse it, without

without danger. Yet mistake me not. I urge not this, from any conviction of my own, that such publications have injured Christianity: (for though truth may be perverted, yet it cannot be changed) but I urge it, because few, who read, have vigilance enough to parry the attacks of a dexterous assailant; and because the unsuspecting are too often undone by their own simplicity, or from a natural propensity, which we all of us feel, to admire what is novel, and ingenious.

Impropriety of language should be avoided upon all occasions. Whoever affronts the modest, by indelicate conversation, or improper behaviour, does an injury to religion, which cannot be practised with success, independant of morality. And here, I would reprobate, as strongly as possible, the perusal
of

of books, whose elegant language makes their sentiments attractive; in which vice is represented, as amiable as possible; and virtue as defective; in which ideas are excited, which ought to be suppressed; and imagination plays the harlot with the mind. Believe me, such fascinating and abandoned treatises are the tools of designing hypocrites, to corrupt the innocence of the rising generation: and I know not, whether immodesty in theory, is not more pernicious than immodesty in practice.

If it is impossible to reconcile religion to the lusts and passions, which so easily beset us, it were better to neglect it totally, than to make it an avowed object of derision. Must Life, Death, and Immortality, with all their venerable authenticity, be treated as phantoms, fictions, words? Must Ridicule judge, decide,

decide, condemn? Must Wit dethrone Divinity, and place a mimic usurper in her room? If there be a future judgement, and Christ shall appear in the clouds of heaven, such wanton abominations can never pass unpunished! Where will be the Triumph of the Scoffer, when Wit has emptied its quiver; and Death has blunted the last dart of malignity? what will ensue when the book of Record is opened, and one dark page displayed, full of sore and provoking indignities, not arising from the consequence of Sin, but the intention of the Sinner? A day of judgement even the infidel will allow, may possibly arrive. Would any man of common sense, hazard the possibility of such a condemnation? certainly not---but these free thinking philosophers have as few pretensions to discretion, as to virtue.

Reason,

Reason indeed returns, when her faculties can no longer be exerted; and a wish is at last indulged, without the power of repentance. For many have lived Unbelievers; but few, or none, have died so. The fear of dissolution is a stern inquisitor; and forces the heart to confess that which the tongue has been braggart enough to deny. A wise man will put a mark upon such dangerous characters; and never encourage them by friendship or familiarity. There is an infection and a magick in blasphemous wit: it twines, like a viper, around the heart; and its sting is the "sting of death." Laughter and derision suit light and trivial subjects: but, it is presumptuous and wicked, to be ludicrous when devotion is concerned. From the abuse, and not the exertion of our faculties, mischief and sin arise.

D

Although

Although the subject requires a more judicious and delicate comment than I can supply; although it is a mystery, fathomless as the sea, and loathsome as the grave; the Ethicks of modern philosophy, must not pass without observation, or censure. Not, that I would deviate from my track, to stumble upon darkness: but when such abominations are pointed to by the finger of scripture; to express neither hate nor horror of them, might be termed indifference, or something more approximate to approbation.

The declaration of the Apostle is realized.---The champions of infidelity have "walked after their own ungodly lusts" ---they would "take peace from the earth;" and fill its four parts, with desolation and death. Their compact and indivisible system of terrific iniquity, is beyond

beyond all comparison, and almost exceeds credibility. Free thinkers *we* have numbered, and free writers in abundance. Scepticism and Ridicule have assailed the sober truths of Christianity. But this was a skirmish of genius; not a war of extermination: these knights of some romantic hypothesis, entered the lists, singly and alone; their lances glittered but for a season----and then rusted in forgetfulness. It was reserved for Continental politics, to tear away the veil of decorum and delicacy; to recommence the horrors of wild and savage life: it is the Characteristick of the Philosophy of France, to transmit from age to age, an indelible and national abhorrence of God and Man. The unholy league of her sophisters, has vilified and broken down

* Vide the Abbe Barruel, passim.

down the altars of God; has dignified the meek and lowly Jesus, by a title, which it gives me offence to think on; and I should blush, even to name. The burden of France, is the burden of Europe. Doubtless, we also are "in perplexity;" but should we therefore "despair?" Shall the Men of Galilee bow to the Genius of Geneva?---shall none be watchful? nor strengthen the things which remain? It is our part, my reverend Brethren, to raise the hallowed censer; and cry hold, to this desolating plague. For who, but the ministers of God, should circumscribe and exorcise these baneful fiends of Anarchy and Atheism? Who but the Clergy, should labour abundantly in their vocation: labour, with an honest and resolute zeal, chastened by discretion, yet chilled not by lukewarm neutrality?---Satan
is

is let loose on Man---it is time, to rally round the Rock of Christ; to take our stand in the sanctuary of holiness; and rise or fall, with the name of God; and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Finally, may the formidable judgments of God have their proper effect. May they make the inconsiderate revolvers from Godliness, reverence that last and greatest testimony, which was given by the Spirit to the truth of Christianity! For whosoever derides the Scripture, blasphemes against the holy Ghost, by rejecting the grounds of conviction, in favour of his lusts: so that his infidelity becomes incurable; and if without remedy, unpardonable. "For it is impossible," says *St. Paul*, "for those, who are once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift; and

and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and the powers of the world to come; if they should fall away, to renew them again unto Repentance."

the testimony of Jesus Christ. Finally, may the formidable judgments of God have their proper effect: may they make the inconsiderate re-volets from Godliness, reverence that last and greatest testimony, which has been given by the Spirit to the truth of Christianity.  the Spirit of God grounds of conviction. His lusts: so that his infirmities become incurable; and it without question. "For it is impossible for those, who are once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift:

